

Part 43: To the ends of the earth

Paul Cheng| Acts 28:11-31

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Have you ever looked at your fingerprints? But have you really really looked at your fingerprints? If you have, then you'll know that not only are all of your individual fingers different and unique, but every single person in the history of the world has a different set of fingerprints! Even identical twins have different prints. They share 100% of the same DNA, but their fingerprints will be different.

This is because fingerprints are not handed down directly through genes, but are instead, formed as soon as 10 weeks old in the womb. They start as smooth pads that are created by blood vessels and connective tissues and then they are absorbed back into the fingers and this is when the little ridges appear.

Towards the end of the 19th century, a Scottish surgeon was doing research on fingerprints and discovered that the oils and moisture on our fingertips left invisible fingerprints on surfaces that were touched. They would use powders to expose what was thought to be invisible. This would later be used in forensic sciences to either incriminate or exonerate those who were suspected of a crime. What was once hidden to the human eye was now visible.

Our passage this morning will conclude our time in Acts and will record Paul finally getting to Rome and then describe Paul's ministry while in Rome. While this passage seems pretty straightforward on first read, I hope to show you the Holy Spirit's fingerprints all over this last section of Acts. You see, just as a forensic analyst uses techniques to reveal the hidden fingerprints on the surface, Luke is showing us in this final passage of Acts that the Holy Spirit is providentially guiding Paul's every step, and God is the one building his church.

The title of this sermon is "To the ends of the earth." Our main idea this morning will be this: The Holy Spirit advances the gospel to the ends of the earth. We will see God do this through the Holy Spirit in 4 ways. First, we will see the gospel go forth because The Spirit Runs. Then we will see The Spirit's Purpose in Paul's imprisonment. Next, we will see The Spirit's Condemnation and Hope through Paul's speech. And finally, we will see The Spirit's Persevering Work. We are going to begin this morning by seeing that the gospel goes forth because The Spirit Runs.

We have finally come to the end of Acts and the final leg of Paul's long missionary journey that is recorded for us in Acts by Luke. Most Bibles today have maps in the back of them. One or two of them will be dedicated to Paul's missionary journeys. There are three recorded missionary journeys that Paul takes. The first was Paul's travels with Barnabas, which ended with the council of Jerusalem. The second journey began with the split of Paul and Barnabas, and included Paul teaming up with Silas and Paul meeting Priscilla and Aquila. The third journey included spending time in Ephesus and Corinth, saying goodbye to the Ephesian elders, and ultimately being arrested in Jerusalem.

The maps you have will label our passage today as his journey to Rome, but I would like to suggest that his missionary task did not end with his arrest in Jerusalem. You see as we have spent the last several weeks chronicling Paul's trials and his journeys at sea, we are seeing the fulfillment of Jesus' words to Ananias after Paul's conversion. The Lord tells Ananias, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." (Acts 9:15-16).

Therefore, the last leg of Paul's recorded journey is not simply an interruption to Paul's ministry, it is Paul's ministry. Though he moves in chains, Paul is as free as he ever has been, under the direction of the Holy Spirit. One might simply call this God's providence. That's a big word that sometimes gets mixed up with God's sovereignty, which is God's right and power to do as he wills. But God's providence is his purposeful governing over all things and events.

Therefore, in God's providence, Paul would finish most of his earthly ministry in chains. He would finally get to the ends of the earth, in chains and under the protection of the Roman Empire. In

God's providence, the empire that would try to stamp out all Christianity in a few short years, brought God's chosen instrument right into its own belly.

In verses 11-13, we see that Paul gets on a ship that had wintered on the island of Malta and has agreed to take them to Italy. So for a geographic picture, they are moving from below the boot of Italy and going straight across the foot of the boot. They stop a couple times due to wind or lack of, and in verses 14-15 we see that Paul is greeted by brothers.

¹⁴ There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome. ¹⁵ And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage.

Paul's most famous letter is his letter to the church in Rome. This was written several years prior to Paul arriving in Rome. If you've read through the book of Romans, you'll know that Paul had a great affection toward this church, but he had not made it to Rome himself. In our passage this morning, Paul and Luke find brothers that Paul had prayed for in his letter on their journey to Rome. Luke tells us that "Paul thanked God and took courage." There's a couple reasons Paul has to be encouraged.

First, the gospel and the Spirit are running. Paul, in his 2nd letter to the Thessalonians writes, "Finally brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored." (2Thess 3:1) Paul is praying that the word would go forth with speed ahead of him. Rome was not a church plant of Paul's. We are seeing the fruit of Paul's prayers. The gospel had made it to Rome and a church was planted without him. Paul was not jealous to be the one to plant the church, Paul was zealous for the gospel to reach the ends of the earth.

Back in 2018, Sovereign Hope laid out 3 goals for the next 50 years. Those were to be a healthy church, a Missoula church, and a sending church. Sovereign Hope Church desires to be a sending church. We are not jealous to be a sending church so that we have our fingerprints on everything. No, we desire to be a sending church because we are zealous for the gospel to reach the lost in Missoula and surrounding areas, and we are zealous for the gospel to reach the unreached, to those who have never heard the good news of the gospel.

The only way this happens is by the Spirit and the Word speeding ahead of us. So pray for this. Pray that Ellyn and I would not be the only and last missionaries to be sent out of this place. Pray that this church would continue to strengthen local churches around us, and pray that we would plant a church in the surrounding areas that desperately need one. And when the Lord moves in such a way, thank God for it, just as Paul did.

The second reason Paul was encouraged was because of the fellowship and comradery of brothers and sisters in Christ. Though Paul was trusting in the promises of God and walking in step with the Spirit, this did not negate the need for encouragement by fellow saints. Paul knew that he was entering the final leg of his life. He knew that more suffering was coming, yet he thanked God and took courage because of fellow believers who traveled far to meet him upon his arrival to Italy.

Remember that Paul is under Roman imprisonment at this time. With all the people visiting him, you might be led to think that he is free. But verse 16 reminds us that he had a soldier with him at all times, possibly even shackled to Paul. He is being led to Rome to stand trial. He is not guilty yet, but being associated with a prisoner of Rome would not be great for your social status. Yet, these brothers not only come to encourage him, but they travel a great distance to do so. Paul, when writing to the church in Rome writes, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." (Rom. 1:16)

These brothers in our passage are not only confessing that they are unashamed of the gospel, but they are showing through their actions that they are unashamed. For these men are traveling to come welcome Paul to their land and are openly associating themselves with a man who is a prisoner of Rome.

Just 30 years before this, men stood alongside Jesus until he was arrested. Then they scattered and would deny even knowing him, much less admit they were his disciples. Yet we see the power of the gospel and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit beginning to take deep root in the hearts of the early church. So the question I have for all of us this morning is this: In what ways are you ashamed of the gospel?

There is so much rhetoric in the news and on social media about Christian hatred due to our views sexuality, gender, and the exclusivity of the gospel.

What happens when you're surrounded by a group of your coworkers, peers, or classmates and they begin to talk about these subjects? I'll tell you that my first reaction is the deep desire to remove myself from the conversation. I know that eventually I will be asked what I think. Will I betray all my core beliefs because I don't want to face the ridicule and shame that will come when I tell them what I believe? Or will I cower away like Peter did and deny my savior and my God? Or will I stand, unashamed of the gospel, like these men did?

Do you pray this way? Do you pray that you will stand strong in the face of opposition? Do you pray that you will not be ashamed of the gospel? Do you pray that you will speak truth in a world that twist lies into truth? Brothers and sisters take heart, for it is the Lord that tells us through the prophet Isaiah, "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." (Isa 41:10) Pray for courage and conviction, and pray that you will not be ashamed of the gospel when that time comes.

Now Paul is led into Rome and Luke tells us in verse 16 that he is essentially placed on house arrest. If you remember Paul's pattern of ministry from the book of Acts, you'll recall that Paul's first stop in a city was to go to the synagogue and reason with the Jews. But because he's on house arrest, verse 17 tells us that he invites the synagogue to his place. He invites the Jewish elders to his home and begins to tell them why he's in Rome. This will be our 2nd point this morning, the Spirit's Purpose of Paul's chains.

Let's read verses 17-20 to see the reason Paul tells the elders that he is in Rome.

¹⁷ After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, "Brothers though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. ¹⁸ When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. ¹⁹ But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—though I had no charge to bring against my nation. ²⁰ For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain."

So Paul tells the elders that he's not in Rome because he's guilty of anything, but because he's innocent. His hands are clean, but he was forced to appeal to Caesar due to the Jews demands for his life. But he makes it clear that he has no charge or bone to pick against his people and his nation.

Instead, Paul tells the elders, "It is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain." I want you to stop and think about that statement for a second. It is for the hope of Israel that he is wearing these chains. Paul's hope was never to go free. Remember in Acts 21 when Paul returned to Jerusalem and it was prophesied that Paul would be bound and delivered into the hands of the Gentiles? His companions beg him to not go, but he rebukes them, and then they pray that "the will of the Lord be done."

We begin to see more clearly the will of the Lord being done. Paul went to Jerusalem to be handed over to the Gentiles, so that he might proclaim the gospel to the different courts. Then he would be sent to Rome, to preach the gospel to the Gentiles there, but most importantly, to his people. Paul's hope was not to be free; Paul's hope was the salvation of Israel, and he would joyfully suffer for the hope and salvation of his people.

You see, what Paul has shown us in the book of Acts, is that Jesus meant what he said. Jesus told us that in order to follow him we are to pick up our crosses and follow him. This often means that as we seek to become more and more conformed to the image of our Savior and seek to love his people, it will be costly.

Therefore, as we examine our lives in light of this text and the whole of Scripture, I want to ask ourselves this question: In what ways am I using my circumstances as an excuse for not laying down my life for others and preaching the gospel? If we continue to wait in this life for the perfect time or the perfect season, we will go to the grave with a thousand regrets. Would Paul happily walk out of his house arrest and get to Spain like he wanted to? Absolutely! But that is not where God had him.

God had him in chains in Rome. So what did he do? He preached the gospel and wrote letters of encouragement to fellow churches. What are you waiting for? Are you waiting until your married? Until you've graduated and you're done with school? When you have more free time? When you have a better job? When the kids are older and out of the house?

Have you considered that your circumstances are the very means by which God intends for the good news of the gospel to go forth? You can wish all you want for a different set of circumstances, but you cannot change the will of God. Instead, God has you right here, right now. Your circumstances are not a hindrance to gospel advance, they are the vessel by which our God uses to advance his Word and bring people to himself.

After Paul tells the elders why he is in Rome, the elders tell him in verses 21 and 22 that word of Paul hasn't made it to their ears. They have just heard about the 'sect' of Christianity and that it is spoken against everywhere. They tell him they're interested and they set up a time to come visit and listen to him. And this brings us to our third point this morning, the Spirit's Condemnation and Hope. Let's read verses 23-24 and see the meeting between Paul and the Jews.

²³ When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. ²⁴ And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved.

So Paul teaches from the Scriptures from morning until evening, testifying to the kingdom of God, and using both the Law of Moses and the Prophets. Paul is not trying to convince his fellow people of a different religion or tradition. He is trying to show them that Jesus is the exact fulfillment of everything they have been waiting for.

I imagine that he would have brought them to Leviticus 16 about the two goats. The first goat was to be killed as a sacrifice for the sins of the people, and the second goat was to be set free into the wilderness to show that God removes the sins from his people. He would then explain to them that this was to point to the Christ to come that would both atone for our sins and also remove our sins as far as the east is from the west.

I also imagine that he would've taken them to Ezekiel 34 as the Lord declares that he will be the great shepherd that searches and seeks out his flock. The one that will rescue them, feed them, and protect them. He would have told them of Jesus' words that he is the Good Shepherd that lays down his life for his sheep.

He would've brought them to Jeremiah (31) to show them how Jesus brought the new covenant promised. He would've shown them in Isaiah (53) how Jesus is the suffering Messiah, who was to be born of a virgin (7). Or in Zechariah (9/12) that our Messiah come riding in on a donkey, and then would be pierced.

All of these prophecies and more would've been on Paul's mind as he reasoned and tried to convince his brethren that Jesus is the one who bore our sins, who died, who was resurrected, and then ascended into heaven, where he is ruling and reigning and is coming back to ransom his church and his people.

This is the hope that he held out for his people, and this is the hope that I hold out to you. If you're here this morning and you either don't know who Jesus is, or he's been relegated to whatever narrative the world wants to create about him, I urge you to search the Scriptures and ask questions. Jesus is not some made up character in an ancient book. He's the Lord of all, the King of Kings, the Savior of the world. I pray now that you would seek after him. For he is the one who says, "ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened." (John 11:9-10)

Paul gives the hope of the gospel to his people and then we see their response. Some were convinced, but others disbelieved. They then depart after Paul quotes Isaiah 6,

The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet:

²⁶ “Go to this people, and say,
“You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”
²⁷ For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed;
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.’

²⁸ Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.”

I don’t think any of us need to wonder why the unbelieving Jews left after Paul says this to them. He has just spoken condemnation to them. But look carefully at your Bibles and look at verse 25. Who does Paul say is actually condemning them? Is it Paul? Paul tells us it’s the Holy Spirit. This not only shows us the true author behind the Bible, but it also shows us the one that actually changes hearts.

Paul is quoting from Isaiah 6. Now to understand the magnitude of what Paul is saying we have to have an understanding of Isaiah 6. Most of you probably know Isaiah 6. It’s the chapter that describes the glorious vision that Isaiah has of God in his temple. It’s an amazing chapter that includes verse 8,
⁸ And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.”

Everyone loves this verse! I love this verse! But most people stop there, and unfortunately, they miss the context of the passage. You see, right after Isaiah volunteers himself to speak God’s words and to be his messenger, God tells Isaiah what Paul tells the Jews. God tells Isaiah to go to his people and tell them that they will remain blind, deaf, and dumb.

I want you to meditate on that for a second. God asks for a volunteer to go speak on behalf of God to the people. Isaiah willingly says he will do it. You can imagine that he thinks he’s about to go preach salvation to his people. Maybe he will preach a sermon just like Jonah and all will repent and believe. But that is not what God tells him to do or say.

He is to go to his people and tell them that they will remain dead in their sins. His message will actually dull their hearts. Faithfulness for Isaiah looked like communicating the words of God that would lead to the deadening and destruction of his people. So the question is, why would Paul use this here with his people?

God has made his intentions clear from the beginning. In Genesis 12, God tells Abram that he will make him into a great nation and bless him. He tells him that through Abram, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. In other words, through Abram’s seed, all the nations of the earth will be saved. We later see that this flows through Isaac, Jacob, and then to the 12 sons of Israel. God had set apart a people for himself. But they did not listen and obey their God and began to worship other gods and idols. God kept calling them back, especially through the prophets, like Isaiah, but they continued in their sin. Yet the promise remained that all the nations of the world would be blessed through the seed of Abram.

That seed would come through Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Jews rejected and put to death. God’s prophecy through Isaiah was continuing: the people’s hearts were dull, their eyes were blind, and their ears were deaf. They rejected the long-awaited prophet, priest, and king that would bring about the salvation of their people. Therefore, through the strange providence of God, the gospel and good news of salvation is sent to the Gentiles because of the rejection by the Jews.

However, both Isaiah 6 and our passage this morning show that there is still hope for a remnant of Israel. The last half of verse 27 says, “lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.” A remnant of Israel will be saved. They will turn from their sins and turn to Jesus. But this salvation will be sent to the Gentiles; they will listen. To come full circle, this will fulfill Jesus’ words in Acts 1:8. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy

Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Hope will go to the ends of the earth. The Gentiles will hear and they will listen. So then the question we should ask the text is: how does seeing Jesus as the fulfillment of all of the Old Testament and the promise that the good news will go to the Gentiles have to do with me? How do we make sense of all this?

Though the gospel has reached every continent in the world, we know that there are peoples and language groups that have yet to hear the good news of the gospel. We also know that we all have coworkers, children, friends, and family that have not responded to the message of the gospel with faith and repentance. We cannot control the hearts of those that we share the gospel with.

But that was never our job. Isaiah’s job was to go and speak. Paul’s job was to go and speak. Our job is to go and speak, not to convert. God says “I will heal them,” not, “and you will heal them.” We believe that it is God who saves, not our wit or our eloquence. But this does not mean that we sit on our couch or in the comfort of our homes and do nothing. There have been Christians in the past and present that believe that because it is God that saves, that we do not need to then share the gospel with others. For if it’s God’s will to save, then he will save. But that is simply unbiblical.

We are to preach the good news of the gospel to anyone and everyone that will listen. We are to scatter seed. We are to be heralds of the King. We are to preach the gospel to our children every moment that we can because they will soon be gone and out of the home. We are to preach the gospel to our roommates when all we want to do is hide in our room. We are to plead with peoples’ souls, for they are on the brink of eternal fire.

We are to plant churches, so that more people can hear the preaching of the Word. We are to leave family and friends in order to cross seas and oceans for the sake of the gospel. We are to suffer ridicule and shame for the sake of the name. We are to spend the rest of our days proclaiming the majesties of Jesus, our suffering savior that left all to accomplish our salvation.

This is our job. We leave the winning of souls to the one who has ransomed ours. But brothers and sisters, we have much still left to do. May we continue to plead and preach until Jesus returns or he calls us home.

And this brings us to our final point this morning, the Spirit’s Persevering Work. Let’s read verses 30-31 and see how Luke’s narrative finally ends. ³⁰ He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹ proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

If you feel like the end of this magnificent book is somewhat abrupt and underwhelming, you wouldn’t be the first or the last. This book has seen the ascension of Jesus, the Holy Spirit coming down at Pentecost, the conversions of thousands after sermons from the apostles, the awesome conversion of Paul, the first Gentile converts, jailing’s, beatings, councils, ship wrecks, breakups, stoning’s, killings, baptisms and deaths, highs and lows, defeats and victories. Yet it ends with Paul still under house arrest and him welcoming those that would listen to the gospel.

This is officially the end of Paul’s narrative. He would go on to write the letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and to Philemon during this period time. Based on Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus, we can conclude that Paul was released from prison, continued preaching the gospel, and then was imprisoned once again. Some extrabiblical sources that come from an early church father within the 30 years from when Paul was in prison corroborate that Paul was released, imprisoned, and then martyred by the Roman emperor Nero.

We all crave a good ending to a story. My wife won’t watch any shows that don’t have a conclusion to the plot by the end of the episode. I think we all want to hear the end of this story. To continue to hear about whether or not Paul finally got to Spain like he desired. Or we hope that we get a peaceful end to a faithful life like what we get about Moses at the end of Deuteronomy. But that is not what we are given.

Instead, we are given a statement about Paul, and a statement about the gospel. First, Paul is given 1 sentence to summarize the end of his ministry. He essentially fades to black. While, Luke most

certainly wrote this before the end of Paul's imprisonment, and he could have continued on about Paul's life and ministry, he's chosen to stop here. So why do this? The book of Acts is often just seen as a narrative about Paul and his ministry. However, I would argue that this book isn't about Paul at all, it's about God himself.

The book of Acts starts with Jesus proclaiming that the good news of the gospel would go forth from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, and we finish here at the end of it in the same way we started. The gospel is going forth from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Yes, Paul and the other apostles played a huge part in the beginning, but they're all dead. Yet, the gospel is still going forth through the power of the Holy Spirit.

And just as Luke concludes his narrative, it is going forth with all boldness and without hindrance. This story is not just some made up story. We are reading history, and we are now a part of history. This is the grand story of the world. This is the story of God and his people. This is the story of God and his church. And what grace given to us that we get to play a small part in his grand story of redemption.

I want to close this morning with a portion of a poem that embodies not only the mission given to us in the Great Commission, but also the power of the gospel that is continuing to go forth with all boldness and without hindrance to the ends of the earth. What we saw started in Acts is continuing today in and by God's providence. And God's providence often takes twists and turns that we do not often expect or understand. But his purposes are good and his purposes will be accomplished.

This poem was written by a Presbyterian missionary to China, who wrote this to honor a fellow missionary that was martyred while serving in China. He was killed by communist bandits after being harassed. This poem, a few years later, was passed on from a father to his young daughter and son-in-law before they set sail for China, to preach the gospel to the unreached. This young couple's names were John and Betty Stam. This couple would go to China, and would be martyred for preaching the gospel to the Chinese people.

However, in God's providence, the ground that they wet with their blood would soon give way to gospel fruit in the form of souls won for Christ. Before the presbyterian minister was killed, they asked him, "Are you afraid?"